FIVE HAMMER STROKES FOR CREATING EXPOSITORY SERMON OUTLINES

Here are the fundamentals to move from a biblical text to a message structure that speaks to today's listeners.

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great preacher of London in the mid-twentieth century, knew that structuring the sermon is one of our most difficult homiletical tasks:

> The preparation of sermons involves sweat and labour. It can be extremely difficult at times to get all this matter that you have found in the Scriptures into [an outline]. It is like a . . . blacksmith making shoes for a horse; you have to keep on putting the material into the fire and on to the anvil and hit it again and again with the hammer. Each time it is a bit better, but not quite right; so you put it back again and again until you are satisfied with it or can do no better. This is the most grueling part of the preparation of a sermon; but at

> the same time it is a most fascinating and a most glorious occupation. (*Preachers and Preaching*, 80)

This article can't (and shouldn't) stop the sweat and labor, but it can help you strike skillfully. When pastors begin their sermon prep (and, unfortunately, sometimes when they *end* their sermon prep), the text often seems to be, as Hamlet said, "words, words, words." The relationships among the words—the *ideas* presented—are hard to discern and even harder to package for the congregation. The purpose of this article is to help us make sense of the words and structure them in a way that makes sense to the listeners. As homiletical blacksmiths, five strokes of the hammer help us structure our sermons.

First stroke: state the exegetical outline

Summarize the flow of thought in your text. We call this the exegetical outline, and it is part of basic exegesis. If you have gotten away from that discipline, get back to it. Charting the flow of thought with a mechanical layout, grammatical diagram, or semantic structural analysis is an indispensible step in creating an expository sermon. Simply identifying a general theme is not enough to reveal authorial intention. Laying out the major ideas and their relationships will help you identify the unifying core of the text, what Haddon Robinson calls the exegetical idea.

Once you articulate that idea, then you can turn it into your sermon's "big idea." In essay writing this is called the thesis. In public speaking it is called the central idea. The big idea is the distilled essence of the message. Compare the exegetical idea (the text's central truth) and the big idea (the sermon's central truth):

Exegetical idea	Big idea
Purpose—to summarize the passage in a single sentence	Purpose—to communicate the message of the passage in a single sentence so that it aids comprehension and lodges in memory
Sounds like a commentary	Sounds like a proverb
As long as necessary for accuracy and thoroughness	Fifteen words or fewer
Third person	First or second person
Past tense	Present tense
Example from Psalm 32: The psalmist praised God for the forgiveness he received after confessing his sin, because blessing attends the one whose sins are covered by God, but woes attend the one who tries to cover his own sin.	Example from Psalm 32: Cover or be covered.

I believe that every sermon should have a big idea for two reasons. The first relates to sound hermeneutics. Conservative exegetes believe in authorial intention—that the biblical authors intended to convey ideas to their readers. In any thought unit such as a paragraph in an epistle or a scene in a narrative, the author wanted to get a point across. To be sure, texts have many ideas, but our job in exegesis is to discern how those ideas relate to each other. They swirl around a central point. Texts are not a random hodgepodge. Stating the exegetical idea helps us articulate authorial intention. My second reason relates to communication. Sermons are most effective when they are laser focused. When the preacher cuts extraneous fat, listeners comprehend clearly. Reducing the essence of the sermon to one idea will increase its impact.

As you outline the text's flow of ideas, you can expect to see the following patterns of thought, common to human experience:

- problem-solution
- cause-effect
- contrast (not this, but this)
- chronology (first this happened, then this, then this)
- promise-fulfillment
- lesser to greater
- argument-proof
- explanation-application
- principle-example/amplification

Other patterns undoubtedly exist, and once you train your mind to think in logical categories like these, discerning flow of thought becomes second nature. Some of the patterns above use inductive reasoning, and some use deductive reasoning. Induction starts with particulars and moves toward a conclusion or principle. The first six patterns are inductive. Deduction starts with the conclusion or axiom and then explains, proves, or applies that idea. The last three patterns are deductive.

Here is an exegetical outline for James 4:13–17, with commentary on the flow of thought in italics:

I. Some ofJames's readers boasted about tomorrow (v. 13).

Effect: The passage begins inductively with an example of boasting. This is the effect of the cause James will identify later in the passage (arrogance). The author places a hypothetical speech in the mouths of the readers to show them what arrogance sounds like.

II. James rebukes such boasting (v. 14).

Contrast: In contrast to the wealth of knowledge implied in the boastful opening speech, the readers actually know little. They do not know the future. They are as fragile as mist. The logical flow from verse 13 to verse 14 is contrast: not this, but this.

III. James contrasts boastful speech with submissive speech (v. 15).

Contrast continued: The author continues with the logic of contrast by creating another hypothetical speech. This second speech shows proper words that are submissive and humble, in contrast with the opening speech.

IV. The readers boast because they are arrogant (v. 16a).

Cause: The author has described and illustrated the effect (boasting), and now he reveals the cause: arrogance. Westerners normally think in terms of cause-effect, but the reverse, effect-cause, is also possible.

V. Boasting is evil, and anyone who knows this, but persists in boasting, sins (vv. 16b–17).

Summary: James pulls the camera back to present the broad landscape. He ends by summarizing the previous exhortation about boasting. (Another possibility is that he provides further argumentation why the readers should not boast.)

Here is an exegetical outline for Psalm 32:

I. Blessed is the one whom the Lord has forgiven (vv. 1–2).

Announcement of theme: David summarizes the whole psalm with this headline.

II. When the author tried to cover his own sins, the Lord disciplined him (vv. 3–4).

Problem: David describes the trouble his silence brought—the Lord's heavy hand of discipline. Tradition says that this psalm grew out of David's personal experience—his sins of adultery and murder, and his attempt to cover his own sins. After the announcement of the theme, he describes how miserable he was when he refused to confess.

III. Then the author confessed, and God forgave (v. 5).

Solution: After experiencing the discipline of God, David finally confessed and experienced the blessings described in verses 1–2. The logical (and somewhat chronological) flow moves from trouble to grace, problem to solution.

Clear structure of the sermon depends on crystal clear understanding of the flow of thought in the passage.

IV. The author urges others to follow his example and experience God's deliverance (vv. 6–11).

Exhortation: David exhorts the readers to learn from his experience. The wicked experience sorrow, but the love of God surrounds the ones who trust him. Therefore, confess!

Clear structure of the sermon depends on crystal clear understanding of the flow of thought in the passage. Do not rush this foundational step in your exegesis.

Second stroke: rephrase (and possibly reorder) the points as a homiletical outline

Using John Stott's metaphor of "standing between two worlds," the exegetical outline resides in the world of the text, and the homiletical outline resides in the world of the listener. Compare:

Exegetical outline	Homiletical outline
Past tense	Present tense
Third person	First or second person
Summarizes the author's thought	Summarizes your thought *from* the text *for* the congregation
Follows the textual order exactly	Usually follows the textual order, but can also follow "thought order"

I'll illustrate the last item in this chart in a moment, but first let me illustrate the top three items. In the examples that follow, notice that the outline no longer sounds like a commentary ("James told his readers to do such and such"; "David did this or that"). Rather, it sounds like a living soul addressing living souls.

Here is a homiletical outline from James 4:13–17:

I. Sometimes we boast about tomorrow (v. 13).

II. We should not do this, because our knowledge is limited and our days are short (v. 14).

III. Big idea: Rather than boasting, we should speak with humility and submission to God's will (v. 15).

IV. The cause of our boasting is arrogance (v. 16a).

V. Now that you know this, if you continue to boast, you sin (vv. 16b–17).

Here is a homiletical outline from Psalm 32:

I. Big idea (summary): Blessed is the one whom the Lord has forgiven (vv. 1–2).

II. Problem: When we refuse to confess our sins, we bake in the oven of discipline (vv. 3–4).

III. Solution: Confess your sins, and God will forgive (v. 5).

IV. Exhortation: Listen to God's wisdom and experience God's deliverance (vv. 6–11).

To return to the issue above—the issue of textual order and thought order—consider this helpful example from Donald Sunukjian (summarized from *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 56–64):

> Textual order: "Don't get mad when the paperboy throws your paper in the bushes." The arrangement is *response* (don't get mad) to *cause* (the paperboy throws your paper in the bushes).
>
> Thought order: A sermon from this "text" could rearrange the textual order into the more natural thought order of *cause-response*. This would help the listeners follow the sequence of ideas. Thus:

I. Cause: Sometimes the paperboy throws your paper in the bushes.

II. Response: When that happens, don't get mad.

Although expository preachers usually adhere to textual order, rearranging the points of the expository outline can sometimes help us stand between two worlds. Rearrangement can help us clarify the meaning of the text.

Here are two examples from the texts above. First is a homiletical outline from James 4:13–17, rearranged for inductive thought order:

I. Our knowledge is limited, and our days are short (v. 14).
Transition: Yet . . .

II. In our arrogance we boast (vv. 13, 16a).
Transition: Therefore . . .

III. Such boasting is sin (vv. 16b–17).
Transition: In contrast . . .

IV. Big idea: We should speak with humility and submission to God's will (v. 15).

The flow of thought in the outline above moves inductively. Starting with the assertion that we are fragile creatures, limited and ephemeral, the sermon's final point is the big idea. The sermon has driven toward the big idea.

Another homiletical outline could be arranged deductively, stating the big idea first. For example, here is a homiletical outline from James 4:13–17 rearranged for deductive thought order:

I. Big idea: We should speak with humility and submission to God's will (v. 15).
Transition: Why? Because . . .

II. Our knowledge is limited, and our days are short (v. 14).
Transition: Yet . . .

III. In our arrogance we boast (vv. 13, 16a).
Transition: Therefore . . .

IV. Such boasting is sin (vv. 16b–17).

Here is a homiletical outline for Psalm 32 rearranged for deductive thought order:

I. Big idea (solution): Confess your sins (v. 5).
Transition: As a result . . .

II. Result: Experience God's deliverance (vv. 1–2).
Transition: In contrast . . .

III. Problem: When we refuse to confess our sins, we bake in the oven of discipline (vv. 3–4).
Transition: Therefore . . .

IV. Exhortation: Listen to God's wisdom, and experience God's deliverance (vv. 6–11).

The example above states the big idea early in the sermon and then returns to it in the last point. The next example, a homiletical outline of Psalm 32 rearranged for inductive thought order, saves the big idea until the last point:

I. Problem: When we refuse to confess our sins, we bake in the oven of discipline (vv. 3–4).
Transition: In contrast, what we truly desire is . . .

II. Contrast: When we allow God to cover our sins, we know peace (vv. 1–2).
Transition: Therefore . . .

III. Big idea (solution): Confess your sins (v. 5).
Transition: As a result . . .

IV. Exhortation: Listen to God's wisdom, and experience God's deliverance (vv. 6–11).

The examples above demonstrate that expository preachers have latitude when it comes to structure. Our normal procedure, once again, is to follow the exegetical outline when creating the homiletical outline, but pastoral wisdom will sometimes suggest that we rearrange the points into a different order.

Third stroke: develop the points

Now that you have summarized the text's flow of thought and have rephrased (and possibly reordered) the points, put flesh on the bones. Develop the ideas by addressing the questions the listeners will ask. (See Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed., 75–96.) If they ask:

Listeners' question	Preacher's response
What does that mean?	You must explain. The preacher takes the stance of a teacher.
Is that true?	You must defend/prove. The preacher takes the stance of an apologist.
So what?	You must apply. The preacher takes the stance of an equipper or exhorter, urging behavioral response.

This stage of structuring a clear and effective sermon demands audience analysis. You have to know the listeners' level of knowledge, belief, and submission to the text. Listen to the points of your outline through the ears of your listeners.

Furthermore, these three developmental questions are psychologically sequential. That is, people will often believe what has been clearly explained to them, and they will often do what they believe. Conversely, they are unlikely to believe what they do not understand; and they will not act upon what they do not believe. I have discovered that many people will respond to the gospel in faith and repentance if we simply explain it clearly. But if we cloud their understanding, they will neither believe nor respond. Our Lord says in this regard: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and *does not understand it*, the evil

one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:19, ESV, italics added).

Understanding—when well established, often leads to . . .
Agreeing—when well established, often leads to . . .
Responding

We fulfill all three functions—explaining, proving, and applying—by taking the truth to every seat, with **S**tory, **E**xample, **A**nalogy, and **T**estimony (SEAT). Remembering that the human mind is a picture gallery, not just a debating chamber, we stand between the words of the text and the hearts of the people by communicating frequently at the bottom of the ladder of abstraction, using concrete support material. This means that you take a general truth, such as "God values justice," or a vague exhortation, such as "be good," and bring that truth down to terra firma, the world of your listeners. (See Figure 1.1.)

To explain 1 Thessalonians 4:3 ("Avoid sexual immorality"), we could state an abstract definition of the Greek term *porneia* ("a broad term that includes most forms of sexual promiscuity"), but we will also cite examples from current events, movies, or TV shows. When explaining, we move from the known to the unknown.

Take another example from 1 Thessalonians 4:8 ("Whoever disregards this teaching disregards God" [paraphrase]). Your audience analysis might reveal that the congregation disagrees. They feel that their sexuality has nothing to do with their relationship to God. They love God, and they are sleeping around. So to convince them that God really means what he says in verse 8, you might use an analogy of a play rehearsal. The director instructs an actor to move downstage, but the actor moves upstage. Time after time as the players run the scene, the actor

Figure 1.1. Ladder of Abstraction

keeps moving upstage. This leads to a rift between the actor and director because deliberately disregarding the director's instructions is a way of disregarding the director.

Other forms of support material also exist besides SEAT, such as quotations and statistics, but those forms work best when coupled with concrete forms such as SEAT. The human mind craves concrete images.

Type of support

Stories

Strengths and weaknesses

These are excellent at explaining, proving, and applying, but a single story can take three or more minutes. That time usually is well invested, but most sermons can afford only a few stories.

Example from James 4:13–17 (Our days are short)

Last year about this time, Deacon Smith was meeting with his small group on a Wednesday night. The phone rang, and the voice on the other end of the receiver stammered in choked and broken words: "Your son has been in an accident." (Finish the story.) We hardly need the reminder, yet the reminder comes to us in verse 15: We are as thin and as fragile as mist. Our days are short.

Examples

Strengths and weaknesses

These are brief instances, miniature stories. They can be as short as a few words. Our sermons should bristle with examples. They are efficient, interesting, and relevant. They are a prime way to adapt the truth to your particular group of listeners, helping you stand between two worlds. The only weakness with examples is that, being specific, they may not connect with some members of the audience. This can be overcome by using multiple examples. Somehow the human mind takes particulars and translates them into universals and then reparticularizes for personal identification.

Examples from James 4:13–17 (Our days are short)

- Daniel Boone made his own cherry wood coffin years before he died. He kept it under his bed, and when visitors came, he would pull it out and lie in it to show them how well it fit. This is how he reminded himself and others that our days are short.
- Trappist monks always have an open grave on the grounds of their property. When one of their number dies, they put him in that grave and then dig another.

In this way, they constantly remind themselves that our days are short.

- The smallest microbe, the most unlikely mechanical failure, or the least expected natural disaster is enough to convince us of the truth of verse 15—that our days are short. Our lives are a vapor.

Analogies

Strengths and weaknesses

Because effective communicators move from the known to the unknown, analogies help clarify new concepts. That is, an analogy turns on the hall light so that listeners will not stumble through a difficult verse. Analogy takes listeners by the hand and guides them through the maze. Analogies work best when followed immediately by real or realistic examples. A drawback is that they can be hard to create. You have to have the skill and patience of a poet to ask: what is this *like*?

Examples from James 4:13–17 (Our days are short)

- Job said, “My life is but a breath” (7:7).
- Moses said we are like grass that springs up and then withers (Ps. 90).
- Paul said we are like a flapping tent being dismantled by the wind (2 Cor. 5).
- David said that his days were “a mere handbreadth” (Ps. 39:4–5).

Note: to learn from three geniuses of analogy, read C. H. Spurgeon, C. S. Lewis, and G. K. Chesterton.

Testimony

Strengths and weaknesses

People long to hear how other people respond to the truth, especially how they are applying it or what keeps them from applying it. In particular, when done with humility and prudence, our listeners long to hear how the *preacher* is living the text.

Using John Stott's model once again, the bridge between two worlds is the preacher. God has ordained that truth be incarnated, so we are not backward about revealing our own questions and reactions to the text. Just make sure that your self-disclosure illumines the truth and the beauty of God. Don't turn the pulpit into the confessor's chamber or psychiatrist's couch.

Example from James 4:13–17 (Our days are short)

Last year about this time, as I was meeting with my small group on a Wednesday night, the phone rang. My brother informed me that . . . (Finish the self-disclosure.) I thought of the words of James 4: "What is your life? You are a mist." Our days are short.

Fourth stroke: link the points with clear transitions

Oral discourse occurs in time. It starts at, say, 11:20 and ends at 11:49. It is a fluid river of words that, once spoken, pass on never to return. The words linger only until the echo fades. In contrast, written discourse occurs in space. You are reading these words. You hold spatial objects—sheets of paper or an electronic device. With written discourse, the rate of communication is under the control of the receiver. You can read one sentence twice, ponder it, underline it, discuss it with the person

next to you, skip it, or lay the words aside and return to them next week. You control the flow of information.

Not so in oral communication. The flow is under the control of the sender, not the receiver. Communication breakdown occurs frequently in oral communication because speakers forget that simple distinction. Those speakers state key concepts only once, as if they were writing, not speaking. They believe that once is sufficient, but in reality those key concepts are quickly engulfed in the current of words sweeping past the listener. Experienced speakers know that repetition and restatement are essential to avoid communication breakdown.

When we apply that axiom to the topic of this article—structure—we see that transitions are some of the key concepts that must be stated and restated. They help listeners stay up with our flow of thought. A good transition will feel labored and redundant to the speaker, but listeners will be grateful that you briefly freeze the river with deliberate redundancy, giving them time to catch up with the river of words. Most listeners have only a foggy sense of what we are talking about as we preach. Blessed is the man or woman who links points with clear, direct, fulsome transitions.

For example, imagine that you are done talking about the first point in your sermon from Psalm 32. You are twelve minutes into your sermon and are now ready to move into the second point. Being an experienced preacher, you know that the minds of your listeners have wandered in the past twelve minutes, so they need to be recollected. Unlike readers, who can review what they have read and who have visual markers like paragraph indentations and headlines, the listeners have only your words and your delivery to help them move from one idea to the next. Knowing that if you state your transition only once,

the listeners will not differentiate that sentence from the other sentences flowing across their ears in the river of words, you need to more deliberately freeze the river momentarily:

I. Problem: When we refuse to confess our sins, we bake in the oven of discipline (vv. 3–4).

Transition: We have seen the problem: namely, when we refuse to confess, we experience the discipline of God. Now let's look at the solution, the way out of this dilemma. Rather than stubbornly refusing to confess, we come clean. We confess, we admit the truth about ourselves. When we mess up, we 'fess up. That is the solution to our problem. Verse 5 shows us that we should confess.

II. Solution: Confess your sins (vv. 5, 1–2).

Notice some of the features of this transition: it *reviews* the previous point, *previews* the coming point, uses synonyms to effect *purposeful redundancy*, and states bluntly the *logical relationship* of the points (problem-solution). To reiterate, such pedestrian transitions feel labored to the speaker, but listeners will rise up and call you blessed.

Fifth stroke: write the introduction and conclusion

The purposes of the introduction are well known: gain attention, surface need, and introduce the subject of the sermon or the entire big idea. The preacher desires involuntary attention, so that listeners are riveted to the Word. The best way to achieve that is with a crisp opening statement that quickly "promises" that the sermon will address needs. Surface need, and you will have all the attention you desire.

The purposes of the conclusion are to summarize and drive home the big idea. These goals are often accomplished with techniques like a simple review, an epitomizing illustration, or a well-conceived prayer. However it is done, the conclusion wraps a ribbon around the entire message to demonstrate its unity and move the listeners toward a specific response. I find that most pastors do well with their introductions but are hit-or-miss with conclusions. This occurs because we run out of time and energy in preparation, or we ourselves do not fully understand the unity of the message and its implications for everyday life. While application should be made throughout the sermon, the conclusion should bring the application to a burning focus.

Expository preaching involves labor and sweat, especially the wearying work of structure, but five sure strokes of the hammer on anvil can help us shape our sermons with clarity and relevance.

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